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Nash, ed., PROCESS THEOLOGY

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pp. 17f., 234). Any community of the frankly "sectarian" (p. 214) type that he advocates, if it endures for long, will (rightly, I think) be found oppressive by a number of its members.

McClendon is keenly aware of such dangers. He looks to practices of truthfulness, mutual criticism, and above all forgiveness to prevent the "soured communitarianism" that "litter[s] the pages of every honest church history" (p. 229). This may underestimate the elusiveness of grace, however. Experience supports Niebuhrians in thinking there is no "technique" by which "an entire community, even of committed disciples, [could] be kept on the track," as McClendon seems to hint may be claimed for the practices of "never-ending congregational *conversation*" and forgiveness (p. 223).

It is not entirely clear to me how far McClendon disagrees with Niebuhr on these matters, or how he would respond to Niebuhrian criticisms. Fortunately we may look for his second, doctrinal volume to shed more light on his eschatology, and consequently on his ethics.

NOTES

1. P. 75. He says this about John Howard Yoder, but with clear approval.

Process Theology, edited by **Ronald Nash**. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, A Mott Media Book, 1987. Pp. xii and 387.

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According to editor Nash, process theology is currently "the chief competitor" to traditional Christian theism. Viewed by its adherents as "an intellectually and emotionally satisfying reinterpretation of Christianity that is compatible with late-twentieth century ways of thinking" and by its critics as "the most dangerous heresy presently threatening the Christian faith . . . a total capitulation to paganism," process theology (PT) has grown so influential that, in the view of Professor Nash, it can no longer be ignored by "traditional theists." "A comprehensive critical assessment of process theology therefore is long overdue. This book is an attempt to redress this situation" (p. x).

It fails, on many counts.

It is, to be sure, *critical*. Save for Norris Clarke's irenic ("door-opening") essay seeking dialogue between PT and neo-Thomism, all of the essays are critical, often harshly critical, of some facets, often of many facets, of PT. The tone of voice varies from calm philosophical analysis and argument to shrill accusation of heresy and sinfulness, and the quality of thought varies even more. Several authors (Craig, Clark, Morris and Pinnock) do manage to find some

modicum of merit in PT—chiefly in its rejection of divine impassibility and immutability—but most contributors reject parts or the whole of PT as internally incoherent, poorly supported and hopelessly incompatible with what is variously characterized as 'traditional,' 'orthodox,' 'classical,' 'historic,' 'Biblical,' 'standard,' 'evangelical' Christian 'consensus,' 'belief,' 'faith' or 'theism.'

Bruce Demarest ("The Process Reduction of Jesus and the Trinity"), e.g., finds the following Christological heresies in PT: "naturalistic theism" (63), "Ebionite Christology" (69), "Pelagian" understanding of sin (72, 80), "Socinian" and "unitarian" understanding of the cross (73), "a patently economic Trinity" (77), "Arian and adoptionist tendencies" (79), and "degree Christology" (80). According to Demarest,

> Process Theology thus denies, as biblically and historically understood, Christ's eternal pre-existence, Incarnation, virgin birth, sinlessness, deity, atoning death, resurrection, ascension, and second coming, as well as the Trinity of God. In Christology and the related area of the Trinity it is difficult to say what is right and true about the process vision. (p. 83)

[Apparently the only Christological heresy PT escapes, according to Demarest, is Docetism (79)!] Other articles go even further in their criticism. The God of PT is declared to be a "unitarian universalist deity" (347), "a puny godling who behaves like a cosmic sponge soaking up the positive things that happen in the world or a hapless victim of a world completely out of his control" (319-20). PT is "subChristian" (95), "quasi-theistic" (122), "an irrational system" (349), "pretty thin soup" (319).

So if it's criticism of PT you want, you won't be disappointed by this volume. But you won't receive, as advertised, a "comprehensive critical assessment." In the first place, to call something an "*assessment*" implies that it tempers criticism with appreciation, judiciously weighing both merits and demerits. But most of the essayists in this volume, like Demarest, see only the dark side of PT. At the minimum this is unbalanced. At its worst, it results in speculation—or pronouncement—on the (discreditable) motives of process thinkers, in order to account for the apparently wide-spread (and threatening) attractiveness of PT. According to Demarest, it's all a matter of sinful pride: "It [PT] offers a way of engaging in religious discussion, while limiting God's lordship and sovereignty over persons who prize their autonomy" (87). According to Royce Gruenler ("Reflections on a Journey in Process"), a repentant former believer in PT who has returned to the orthodox fold, PT is

> . . . really very simple. It comes down to the matter of a contest of wills, like an adolescent child arguing with its parents. Process [theology]

> . . . doesn't like the idea that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and everywhere present. It wants to stake out some territory where we as free individuals can enjoy some independence from the all-searching eye of the Almighty, the sovereign God portrayed in the Old and New Testaments. (334)

Not all of the fourteen essays in this volume descend to this level of ad hominem critique, but several do, and none comes close to being a "*comprehensive* assessment" of PT.

Nor do the individual essays, while frequently overlapping, add up to a "comprehensive" assessment. It appears that the volume was originally designed as a broadly "evangelical" critique of PT (cf. p. 313). But this primordial aim has failed to concresce: Clarke is a Jesuit; Mannoia gives a purely internal philosophical critique of Whitehead's metaphysics that makes no use of evangelical premises; and the articles by Morris, Peterson, and Craig are "evangelical" only in that they defend traditional views, attacked by PT, which many evangelicals share with other Christians.

Further, the editor notes that "[m]any of the contributors will disagree sharply with some of the views expressed by their colleagues" (xii). So they do. E.g., Demarest derides, and Morris embraces, an "economic" Trinity; Craig defends, and Pinnock rejects, divine foreknowledge of future contingents; and the list of disagreements could be greatly extended. But surely it is implausible to claim that this is "another *virtue* of the book," for if the critics of PT do not agree among themselves as to orthodoxy, their denunciations of PT as heterodox lose cogency. PT—at least in *some* of the positions expressed by *some* of its devotees—may well be heterodox or heretical, but this volume *as a whole* does not show that it is.

A further point about comprehensiveness. Few of the contributors (Clarke and Morris, possibly Mannoia, are welcome exceptions) seem to realize, much less to appreciate, the *diversity* of process thinking. "Process Theology" is no monolith, nor, for that matter, are "evangelical," "Calvinist" or "Christian" theologies. Alfred North Whitehead is not Charles Hartshorne is not Shubert Ogden is not Lewis Ford is not John Cobb is not David Griffin is not Norman Pittenger—just as John Calvin is not Louis Berkhof is not Herman Bavinck is not G. C. Berkouwer is not Abraham Kuyper is not Zacharius Ursinus. What value is there in reducing a whole rich intellectual tradition to some oversimplified thesis or position (or, even worse, to labels like "evolutionary naturalism" and "romanticism" [49]) and then condemning it as being contrary to certain versions of distilled fractions of other (supposedly more orthodox) traditions? One thereby slanders, or slights, the richness of both traditions at once.

I do not mean to suggest that this volume, despite its shortcomings, is totally

without merit. Fundamental and often severe criticisms of traditional Christian views have been made by process thinkers, and thoughtful traditional Christians may want to respond. But wholesale denunciations are unprofitable, on both sides. Better the patient labor of clarifying, analyzing, examining and only then criticizing the various claims and strands of PT, all the while making clear one's own position and being honest about *its* flaws. In this latter vein a few of the essays in this volume can be recommended:

1. William Lane Craig ("Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingency") convincingly argues that the process view that God cannot know future contingents is unsupported and mistaken; one can consistently hold to "an A-theory of time, indeterminism, a view of truth as correspondence, and the truth or falsity of future tense statements," and there is good reason so to hold according to "Biblical theism" (113).

2. Norris Clarke ("Christian Theism and Whiteheadian Process Philosophy") makes what are from a Thomistic position significant concessions to process thought—e.g., that God is really related to the world and mutable as a result of changes in the created world—while insisting that process thought should reciprocally concede "an active causal influx of God on all finite actual entities" and "the actual infinity of the intrinsic reality of God" (247). His nuanced treatment contrasts favorably with the broad-brush polemics of some other essayists in this collection.

3. Michael Peterson ("God and Evil in Process Theology") finds the process concepts of divine power, divine goodness and evil inadequate to the task of Christian theodicy; Whitehead's understanding of "the ultimate evil" as the "perpetual perishing" of time (cf. *Process and Reality*, p. 230) is fundamentally an aesthetic, not a moral reaction, and Whitehead cannot bemoan such "evil" because it is metaphysically necessitated by his system.

4. Thomas V. Morris ("God and the World") goes against the flow of this book in *not* taking PT as a "package deal" but rather in taking "an attitude of critical appreciation" (305). He first accepts the PT claims that God is not "immutable in the extreme sense," hence "not an altogether a-temporal individual" and not "metaphysically simple" (292). But he goes on to argue against PT on two points: First, the PT denial of free divine creation of the world *ex nihilo* ignores the possibility of a consistent "Social Trinitarianism": God can have within the Trinity the relatedness and love PT requires without there being contingent beings distinct from God. Second, Hartshorne's idea of immortality as being remembered forever by God (a conception, incidentally, not shared by all process thinkers) is undermined by other beliefs Hartshorne holds; an unending life need not be boring because "[h]uman creativity, and what it manifests [i.e., *God's* life, on the process view], is a key to the real possibility of eternal bliss for human beings" (304).

There are other essays in this volume that might merit reading for those interested in Whitehead's categorial scheme (James Mannoia's "Is God an Exception to Whitehead's Metaphysics?") or in the concept of divine action (Arthur Holmes' "Why God Cannot Act" and David Basinger's "Divine Power: Do Process Theists Have a Better Idea?"). But this volume should gravely disappoint anyone who seeks a "comprehensive critical assessment" of PT from an evangelical perspective, much less from a "traditional theistic" one. If it does not so disappoint, then I can only repeat the editor's unintentionally ironic understatement near the close of the book: "There is obvious merit in allowing proponents of process thought to speak for themselves" (377).